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ABSTRACT

Service learning discourses have often addressed questions of representation through reciprocity, asking what various participants receive from service learning community experiences. In the process of researching an article about reciprocity, a writing teacher found that reciprocity was often defined as an exchange of learning for some form of labor--learning something about gender (and finding a paper topic) in exchange for 20 hours of community work, for example. In this paper, the educator reframes reciprocity as need and begins by thinking about "need" and looking for a new perspective on service learning. The paper relates that the educator asked some questions about how community members understand the curricular goals of the writing classroom; how community members understand the ways service learning experiences are represented in the writing classroom; and whether the educator's own assignment design is meeting community members' expectations of student experiences. The author interacted with community representatives from 18 non-profit agencies at a community dialogue breakfast and presented student writing samples. Community members responded with questions about confidentiality, context, and representation. The paper considers some of these responses and names some needs that emerged from them. It concludes that thinking about need and reciprocity as a process allows educators to imagine service learning as an activity based on communication and collaborative action; as articulations of multiple and often unequal needs; and as negotiations and interactions between groups with different rules. (NKA)

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Redefining Need in Community-University Partnerships: A Collaborative Perspective.

by Tobi Jacobi

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Redefining Need in Community-University Partnerships: A Collaborative Perspective[1]

I'll begin with an excerpt from "For the Furies" by Marge Piercy.

Weave connections, weave a spider web
around them, weave the cloth in which we all
are threads, weave connections and weave again,
closer, finer.[2]

Issues of representation lie at the heart of this panel. Service learning discourses have often addressed questions of representation through reciprocity, asking what various participants receive from service learning community experiences.

Last spring I worked on an article for *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*[3] that took up this question of reciprocity with my Syracuse University colleagues, Tracy Hamler Carrick and Margaret Himley. We began by asking questions and then suggested a method. Here is a brief excerpt:

> "In what ways do we intellectually and politically frame the service learning requirement? How do we write course rationales? How do we encourage students to talk in the classroom about their experiences? How do we theorize the ethical and rhetorical complexities of student volunteers as they represent people at the sites, many of whom may differ from the students in significant ways? Is reciprocity a main goal of service learning? What sorts of reciprocities can and do (and do not) emerge? What disjunctures and crises, or ruptura, occur when the

[1] This paper was presented at the 2001 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Denver, CO. It was part of a panel entitled, "The 'Need' for Community Dialogue: Perspectives on Negotiating Reciprocity in Service Learning Partnerships." Please see Tracy Hamler Carrick's paper entitled, "(Co)Designing Course and Community Work: An Undergraduate Teacher's Perspective" for an example of student-community interactions in the context of an upper division writing course.

[2] Piercy, Marge. *Stone, Paper, Knife*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.

[3] Carrick, Tracy Hamler, Margaret Himley, and Tobi Jacobi. "Ruptura: Acknowledging the Lost Subjects of the Service Learning Story." *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 4.3 (October 2001): 56-75.

> ideals of service learning are put into practice? How can we as teachers, students, and community participants, acknowledge them?" (56-7).
>
> "We are advocating for a method of narrative refraction – not treating stories as foundational, but as complex, meaningful, ongoing events that can be told and retold to keep learning and teaching in motion.
>
> Recognizing ruptura allows us to resist the master narratives of service learning, reciprocity, happy endings, and the public discourse of activisms. Representing ruptura through telling and retelling makes visible the ways service learning is a contested terrain, a complex social, economic, and political field, in which all participants face challenging interpersonal interactions and representational responsibilities" (72).

What we found in doing research for this article was that reciprocity is often defined as an exchange of learning for some form of labor, learning something about gender (and finding a paper topic) in exchange for 20 hours of community work, for example.

I would like to reframe reciprocity as need. So, let me begin by thinking about 'need.' We might identify teacher 'need' by going to our syllabi and course goals, our assignments and grading practices. We might find student needs in their writing, in their questions and classroom participation, in their course evaluations. But where do we locate community needs? In the Fall 2000 *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, a special issue on strategic directions of service learning research, Nadinne Cruz and Dwight Giles' title asks "Where's the Community in Service-Learning Research?" This is the same question I find myself asking again and again. Without undertaking the enormous task of contacting and maintaining ongoing dialogue with people at each community site, I have to base my understanding of community needs on my own assumptions and the filter of students talking and writing about their experiences.

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I've gotten to a point where I need to revise my understanding of what community articulations of need and reciprocity look like.

Let me begin my story last summer when I called Pam Heintz at the Center for Public and Community Service. I needed a new perspective on service learning, one that was outside the writing classroom and even my department. I wanted direct interaction with community members to either affirm my curricular ideas or replace them in ways that could better serve both student learning and community goals. I also wanted to know how community members understood what we did with the experiences they facilitated. These were some of my questions:

- How do community members understand the curricular goals of the writing classroom?
- Is my assignment design meeting community members' expectations of student experiences?
- How do community members understand the ways service learning experiences are represented in the writing classroom?

I got my chance to interact with community representatives from eighteen non-profit agencies at a community dialogue breakfast in late June. I presented student writing samples and community members responded with questions about confidentiality, context, and representation. I left the meeting feeling excited and full of deeper questions about service learning possibilities. Later, the center sent out an evaluation which eight agencies returned. To begin to understand how community members imagine and understand our work together, I'll share some of their responses and then name some needs that emerged from them.

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Service Learning Agency Responses[4]

→ → What is service learning?

"Service Learning is two things: 1) Volunteer opportunities provided by area agencies where students are matched with volunteer jobs of their choosing. 2) Students learn on the volunteer job assignment and give something to the agency/community at the same time."

"An opportunity for agencies and students to benefit from services being offered. The agencies get much needed manpower and assistance while students receive experience."

"An opportunity for students, the community agencies, staff, families and individuals to learn and grow through the services students provide."

→ → Can service learning can help you meet your agency's mission?

"I know service learning would benefit us at Enable. We have various projects that we would like to accomplish that we do not have the time or resources to complete. We also have direct consumer situations that we would love to have volunteers for."

"Yes. Non-profit agencies consistently struggle with funding. As a result, it is difficult to obtain the necessary staff for the services offered. Service learning can help in this capacity."

"Part of our mission is 'fostering community awareness and acceptance.' Just by having students experience individuals with developmental disabilities helps meet our mission."

→ → What might a project tailored for service learning look like?

"I would not design a specific project for a student. Instead, I would keep abreast of the real needs that exist in the Health Department and match students' skills with existing needs."

"Getting the computers networked with a website."

"Database setup, outcome tracking, consumer surveys, one-on-one volunteers, an unpaid friend!"

"To develop a results oriented way to recruit and maintain volunteers."

[4] The responses listed anonymously here represent a sampling of the agencies' evaluations.

→ → Name some challenges of service learning.

"Simply identifying a good match. The challenge is to assure that we both—the agency and the student—are clear about our needs, what we can provide for each other, etc."

"The students are not communicating clearly on what their expectations are. It would help if students came to the agency with their evaluation forms."

"Transportation has been the primary concern. We are flexible but students must show some initiative. We are on a bus route."

"Students just do enough to skim by."

→ → Other topics for future conversation?

"I would just like to see ongoing communication so we can work together effectively and hopefully more regularly."

"1. Confidentiality Issues
2. Student input as to what kind of challenges they are looking for in volunteer opportunities.
3. Outline what students hope to achieve by volunteer[ing] for the Alzheimer's Association (or any agency)."

"Any issues that will help us hook up with students on the hill."

By analyzing these kinds of responses community members choose to make to the evaluation questions, we can make some claims about the kinds of 'needs' community organizations have in university-community partnerships. We can identify structural, social, emotional and material 'needs' such as

- self-motivated, flexible students;
- concise statements of student/course goals and requirements;
- transportation options and solutions;
- commitments in the form of time and responsibility;
- clear sense of student expectations of community members;
- technology consultation and design;
- research, design, and production of materials; and
- ability to directly evaluate student work.

Looking at these needs, one might once again name reciprocity as the exchange of learning for labor or goods, learning about the social service world in exchange for the design of the database. But when we speak about reciprocity and university-community relationships this way, we risk reducing experiences to a grade or a bank of hours. This sort of reading of student-community interactions draws upon a product-based model rather than one that focuses on process. Thinking about need and reciprocity as a process allows us to imagine service learning as an activity based on communication and collaborative action; as articulations of multiple and often unequal needs; and as negotiations and interactions between groups with different goals.

This version of reciprocity has led me to revise my initial research questions. Now I ask:

- In what ways can the process of working with community agencies enhance the process of learning to write?
- In what ways can these processes work toward the mission or goals of a community agency?
- How can students work directly with community members to design and negotiate such a process?